

Pro-Life Mendacity

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 16, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

This week, several Catholic and pro-life groups and websites raised the specter that the Obama Administration was providing federal funding of abortion through the newly setup "high-risk pool" in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. These high risk pools are one of the first parts of the health care reform law to be implemented. The critics charged that Pennsylvania law allows abortion-on-demand and that the new high risk pools would adhere to Pennsylvania law. This, they concluded, showed that Obama's Executive Order, explicitly stating that the Hyde Amendment ban on federal funding of abortion would apply to the new health care reform programs, was a sham as they said it was all along. No matter the solemn pledge the President made at the time, his bureaucrats were sneaking in abortion funding through the back door.

If any of this were true, it would be a problem. And, to be sure, there are strongly pro-choice members of this Administration who would, if they could, expand abortion coverage to more people and fund it with taxpayer dollars. But, sneaking abortion coverage in through some obscure regulations would create a problem for the President who in the most solemn way pledged repeatedly that health care reform would not be used as a vehicle for expanding "or contracting" abortion coverage. So, his appointees, no matter what they might want, are bound by the President's word.

But, the problem this week had nothing to do with Obama. No one at the [National Right-to-Life Committee](#) [1], or at [LifeSiteNews](#) [2], or at the famously misnamed [Catholic News Agency](#) [3], or at [Fox News](#) [4], or [Father Z](#) [5] bothered to check with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania or with the federal Department of Health and Human Services. Had they done so, they would have found out that these high risk pools, by their very nature, did not anticipate enrolling clients who would be pregnant but, more importantly, federal law, including the President's Executive Order, governed the use of all federal funds in the Pennsylvania program. Why let a little thing like the facts get in the way when you can manufacture some evidence to support your narrative that the Obama administration is "the most pro-abortion president" in history, that Rep. Bart Stupak was a sucker for agreeing to the health care reform on the basis of the President's Executive Order, and, finally, that the health care reform bill will result in federal funding of abortion.

The most strident remarks, reported in a [Cyberspace News Service](#) [6] article, came from Tom McClusky of the Family Research Council. He said: "For our efforts to remove the bill's abortion funding, we were called 'deceivers' by President Obama and 'liars' by his allies. Now we know who the true deceivers and liars really are." While the American people deserve an apology from President Obama for his deception, we should only be satisfied when this Pennsylvania abortion funding is rescinded and the health care law repealed. Hmmm. Repeal the health care law? So, maybe that was driving the narrative on the Pennsylvania story. Whatever.

There is the narrative, so neat and self-confirming. There are the facts. If the two do not cohere, most people, and especially most people who work at organizations that have the word "news" in their title, withhold judgment and dig deeper. Certainly most people do not ramp up the rhetoric. Certainly, most people understand that there is an obligation to verify information before using it as the basis of libelous charges. Certainly, most people do not impugn the motives or character of someone else, someone like the President, based on a

narrative they never bothered to check.

But, LifeSiteNews, Right-to-Life, CNA et al. did not get a comment from HHS nor did they mention that they even tried. (You know, that line at the end of an article that says, "Calls to 'X' were not returned" or "Mr. Smith was not available for comment according to aides.") And, it did not take much effort.

Yesterday morning, I emailed the White House and within half of an hour I had a copy of [this statement](#) [7] from HHS spokeswoman Jenny Backus: "As is the case with FEHB plans currently, and with the Affordable Care Act and the President's related Executive Order more generally, in Pennsylvania and in all other states abortions will not be covered in the Pre-existing Condition Insurance Plan (PCIP) except in the cases of rape or incest, or where the life of the woman would be endangered. Our policy is the same for both state and federally-run PCIP programs. We will reiterate this policy in guidance to those running the Pre-existing Condition Insurance Plan at both the state and federal levels. The contracts to operate the Pre-existing Condition Insurance Plan include a requirement to follow all federal laws and guidance." That seems pretty straight-forward, no?

A quick Google search [found this](#) [8] from Roseanne Placey, press secretary for the Pennsylvania Insurance Department: "We could not and would not use federal money to cover elective abortions, we could not and would not use federal money to go beyond the scope of the Hyde Amendment in the case of non-elective abortions. The Hyde Amendment bars the use of federal funds to pay for abortions, except to save the life of the mother or in cases of rape or incest." Is there any equivocation in those words?

So, what happened? I suspect that somewhere in Harrisburg, there is a staff member at the Commonwealth's HHS who knows a lot about high risk pools but very little about abortion coverage. He or she probably borrowed language from previous regulations, say those which cover some state-sponsored program, and that language was so elastic it did indeed amount to abortion on demand. This is what NRLC and the others focused on, ignoring the fact that federal rules govern federal dollars. I do not mind if someone keeps an eye on the administration's implementation of the health care bill, but they need to be honest and, as we saw in the debate leading up to the health care debate, many people in the pro-life community were willing to lie through their teeth about the reform bill. Remember the death panels?

I applaud people who are profoundly concerned about the sanctity of human life and see it, properly, as a foundational concern for Catholics. I consider myself one such person. As much as I admire the President, I have to admit that his inability to see the justice of the pro-life cause is an extraordinary and large failing, a moral failing and an intellectual failing. But, I also know that as citizens and as Catholics we must be profoundly concerned about the 8th Commandment as well as the 5th, that those who are in the business of reporting and/or analyzing news must be honest, and that special interest groups like the National Right to Life Committee cease to serve the useful function they could serve when their statements and analyses are so tendentious as to invite incredulity. The pro-life cause for which they struggle deserves better.

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Links:

[1] http://www.nrlc.org/press_releases_new/Release071310.html

[2] <http://www.lifesitenews.com/ldn/2010/jul/10071311.html>

[3] <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/new-federal-health-care-fund-subsidizes-abortion-critics-claim/>

[4] <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2010/07/14/anti-abortion-groups-slam-administration-federal-funding-pa-health-plan/>

[5] <http://wdtprs.com/blog/2010/07/obamacare-in-fact-funds-abortions/>

[6] <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/69384>

[7] <http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2010pres/07/20100714d.html>

[8] <http://why.org/cms/news/health-science/2010/07/15/pa-answers-abortion-funding-questions/41934>